

Third Sunday after Pentecost • June 1, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Deuteronomy 11:18-21

"Foundation"

"Simon Says" is a pretty simple game at face value. The game-leader gives instructions to everyone playing, but the players are only supposed to follow instructions if they're prefaced by "Simon says." Yet even after a few rounds of commands, players get knocked out of the competition. Why? Not because they're not following directions, per se, but because they're not following *all* the directions: they act, even when the leader doesn't say "Simon says." A game might start something like this: "Simon says, 'Sit.'" "Simon says, 'Walk along.'" "Jump in place." "Simon says, 'Lay down.'" "Simon says, 'Stand up.'" "Touch the tip of your nose." The leader is actively working to trip the players up, to get them to make mistakes. And if you think that only kids would have a hard time paying attention to the leader, try playing with a group of your friends sometime and see what happens! Ultimately, the last person left in the game of "Simon Says" is the winner: they followed all of the leader's instructions.

Growing up in your home might have felt like a game of "Simon Says," with your parents giving you one instruction after the next. "Wash your hands before dinner." "Eat your vegetables." "Don't run around blindfolded while juggling kitchen knives!" But a parent's role is different than in the game. Rather than trying to get their child to make a mistake, trying to trick them and knock them out of the game, mothers and fathers give instruction to help their children. It's possible that a child might not *enjoy* receiving the instruction. They might not like what they have to do – take eating those vegetables, for example. Choosing to do the "better thing" (Brussels sprouts) isn't always choosing the "easy thing" (mashed potatoes) or the "fun thing" (Cheetos). But in all its various forms, the instruction of a parent is given out of love, looking to build a solid foundation for their child's future.

Though His instruction, God gives His people a foundation for living. Our reading from Deuteronomy jumps right into the middle of God doing just that for the Hebrews. After freeing them from slavery in Egypt and preserving them through a generation's wandering in the wilderness, God is reminding this nation what it will mean to live as His people in the Promised Land into which they're now about to go. He uses some pretty vivid images to do so! God's words of teaching should always be before every single one of the people, as if written on their arm and hand to guide their actions and as if on their foreheads to direct their thoughts. His instruction is to be of such great importance to the people that they should teach it to their children in *everything* that they do: sitting around at home or traveling along the road, lying down to sleep and rising up in the morning – the life of the people is to be a life connected with God's instruction. The direction that God gives in His Word is to shape the nation as the people move into their new land. God's instruction, alone, can provide the solid foundation as they grow.

Life can feel like the most challenging game of "Simon Says" that's ever been played, because Satan is constantly looking for opportunities to confuse you, to prompt you to wonder about God's instruction. The devil's trying to knock you out, hoping that you follow *anything but* God's instruction. You may, in fact, mess up. But God offers forgiveness, because His own Son followed the Father's will perfectly, even through death on a cross. God offers you the prize of life with Him because Jesus won it for you. And because of the Holy Spirit's work in calling you through the Gospel, because of the foundation that He builds, you will be able to focus on living a life that follows Christ, loving God and loving your neighbor. God's instruction can indeed guide your actions and direct your thoughts. When you spend time hearing His instruction here in His sanctuary or reading and studying His Word in the Bible, it will have an effect on your living, because the Spirit is at work.

This weekend, our congregation celebrates our Early Childhood Education Center's accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. And on the occasion of this landmark achievement in the life of our ECEC, we give thanks to God for His work here, because the ECEC is a place where God is building a foundation in the lives of young children. It is a place where they hear that God loves them. We teach Good News that changes everything: as we sing in that beloved hymn: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." We teach what Jesus teaches: "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." God loves us and makes us His people through Jesus, who takes our place. Because of that gift of God's grace, our lives are changed through faith. All of the children in the ECEC, even those who do not come from Christian homes, hear that message of love. Through the ECEC teachers and staff, and the volunteers who read stories and sing songs, these children see God's love in action.

The message that we share through our Early Childhood Education Center is the same message that I share with you now. In Baptism, God adopts you as His own child. And God gives His instruction to all those He calls to be His own. Like a loving parent, God is not looking to play "Simon Says," making you do things just for the sake of doing them or trying to trip you up; rather, He plans to *build* you up so that you may persevere against the challenges and distractions of this world – living a life of joyful service to God and to your neighbor – for Jesus' sake.

As Simon (Peter) says, "May grace and peace be multiplied to you!"

Amen.